

The Impact of the Shortage of Special Educators of Color on the
Overrepresentation of Students of Color in Special Education

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Abstract

While disproportionate representation of students of color has been extensively documented, an understanding of the factors contributing to this phenomenon is limited. The purpose of this paper is to explore existing literature on the premise that a current shortage of special educators of color impacts this overrepresentation.

Since the problem of the disproportionality of students of color in special education programs was first denounced more than forty years ago, only intermittent attention has been given to the problem. Overrepresentation is usually estimated by contrasting the proportion of a school's population with the representation of the same group in a special education program. In the United States African American, Latino Americans and Native Americans are represented in special education at a level greater than their proportionality of the total school population. Teachers of color represent only one-tenth of the teaching force, while students of color make up one-third of the total student population. The shortage is especially evident in fields such as bilingual and special education.

The problems of the overrepresentation of students of color in special education and the shortage of teachers of color in the field appear to be closely intertwined. Currently, programs across the nation are being implemented which may prove beneficial in reducing the representation of students of color in special education as well as increasing the pool of special educators of color. Only by targeting both issues will improvement be shown.

Introduction

Overrepresentation can be defined as the identification and placement of students from a certain ethnicity in a special education program at a rate greater than the percentage the ethnicity is represented in the general student population (Meyer and Patton, 2001). Disproportionate representation has been identified for more than forty years and continues to be problematic for states and school districts across the country. Historically African American, Latino and Native American students have been over identified in the areas of mild mental disabilities, and emotional/behavioral disabilities (Meyer and Patton, 2001).

Students of color are often represented in special education programs in disproportionate numbers with overrepresentation. Teachers of color are also disproportionately represented as special educators, but are underrepresented. According to the Presidential Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) in 1993-1994 children who were black made up 16 percent of the public school population while only nine percent of the teaching force was black. The superintendent of schools in Austin, Texas, Dr. Paschal Forgione, reports that while the Hispanic student population there has continued to grow, three-fourths of new teacher hires were Anglo. Dr. Forgione expresses a desire to “match the demographics of our student population with that of our teaching population – or at least get a little closer” (Rodriguez, 2000).

Both issues are important in providing the best learning experience possible for students of color. While researchers have looked extensively at the problem of overrepresentation, intervention has been at best intermittent. Likewise, the issue of a

shortage of teachers of color has been identified with few solutions proposed. Could a connection between the two issues provide an impetus for designing and implementing solutions?

Methods

A review of literature, both current and historical was undertaken to locate information pertaining to the questions posed. Data was located on the degree of overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs. Likewise, data was obtained regarding shortages of special educators of color. Information on the impact of the shortage of special educators of color on the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs was limited to anecdotal evidence.

The lack of availability of objective data on the question of the impact teacher shortage has on initial student placement and continuation in special education programs suggests a need for further study. It might be helpful to investigate the connection between the two by considering the perceptions of special educators about teaching and learning, behavioral issues, academic interventions and assessment. Breaking down the results of such an assessment based on the ethnicity of the educator and the ethnicity of the students they teach may further our understanding of how individual perceptions impact special education placement. With permission from the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST) the publication *Equity in Special Education Placement: A School Self-Assessment* possibly may be used as an measurement tool (Richards, Artiles, Klinger, and Brown, 2005).

Results

What has been determined is that African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are represented in numbers larger than their percentage of the general school population. According to the U.S. Department of Education African-Americans accounted for 16% of the student population; however, African-Americans represented 32%, or double the current representation, of students with mental disabilities in special education (Thompson, 2007)

Special education teachers are required to take courses in their field and to hold certification in the category matching the needs of the students they teach. A study of teachers in California demonstrated problems with these requirements. In 2003-04, there were more than 48,000 special education teachers with 13% not fully licensed (compared with 7% in general education). The rate of special educators not fully licensed rose to 47% among first- and second- year teachers as compared with general educators (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2004). The United States Department of Education discovered that nationwide more than 12,000 special education jobs were unfilled with 10% of special education teachers lacking special education expertise (Rotherham, 2003).

Discussion

History of Overrepresentation

Lloyd Dunn (1968) first identified the issue of the overrepresentation of minorities in special education in the article *Special education for the mildly retarded—is*

much of it justifiable? which was printed in *Exceptional Children* in 1968. The article raised the question of whether students from minority groups were overrepresented in special education programs. Dunn stated that it is “unethical to label minority group children as mentally retarded when they are disruptive in school, when they are slow learners, and especially when they obtain IQ scores in the 60s” (Dunn, 1968). Dunn’s article was extremely timely, and in the years that followed, parents of minorities challenged special education placement of their children in the court system. This translated into The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142) which is now known as Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act or IDEA). Dunn was interviewed in 1983, after the implementation of Public Law 94-142 regarding the impact on the issue of minority representation in special education. He stated that while minority representation in programs for the mentally retarded had decreased, a new category for students with learning disabilities had taken its place and that these students were now placed in the mainstream, but “fished out once or twice a day and placed in an aquarium (resource room)” both for tutoring and to provide relief for the regular teacher and his or her more able students” (Dunn, 1983). Dunn also stated that research at the time showed that this was no more helpful to students than the previous model. Dunn felt strongly that “full responsibility for the so-called mildly retarded/learning disabled, who are often disruptive males, should rest with regular and remedial educators who will need to do a better job than they have in the past of individualizing instruction for these pupils” (Dunn, 1983). In successive years, the problem of overrepresentation of African Americans in Special Education has grown to include students from other minority groups sometimes called culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). The term “culturally

and linguistically diverse” is used to refer to students from racial/ethnic minority groups and linguistic minority groups. While there is no denial that some students of color do need the services offered by special educators, the issue bears continuous research and effort to insure that representation is equitable. The disproportionately large numbers of students from minority groups are placed in special education suggests that teachers find “something wrong with the child” that special education might be able to “fix” (Meyer and Patton, 2001). Research continues to be conducted in order to determine underlying causes. There is a growing body of research that focuses on many reasons for the overrepresentation that are “outside the learner” and may contribute to the continued overrepresentation as well as highlighting some possible solutions (Meyer and Patton, 2001).

There are concerns that once students are placed in special education, they usually remain in that placement. The National Education Association feels that students in special education programs unnecessarily often encounter a limited, less rigorous curriculum, have diminished expectations leading to lower expectations academically, have less access to academically able peers, are racially separated and stigmatized socially (National Education Association, 2008).

A Shortage of Special Educators of Color

The President’s Commission on Special Education issued a report in 2002 that addressed the shortage of special educators. One problem was that although there have always been shortages of qualified special educators, IDEA was not been designed to help alleviate the shortage. Because adequate steps were not taken to improve teacher

education programs, teachers were not being trained in scientifically based teaching practices (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

Because the commission recognized that students are more diverse in “ability, culture, language, and learning needs”, an emphasis must be placed on recruiting and retaining special educators who “represent the diversity of the children in the classroom” (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). The student population throughout the nation increasingly is more diverse, yet the proportion of minority teachers continues to decrease. In 1993-1994 children who are African American made up 16 percent of the public school population, but only nine percent of the teaching force consisted of educators who are African American. (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002) The Commission is concerned that not enough people from minority backgrounds, especially men, are entering the profession of educating children. Children benefit from having teachers that include individuals from their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The representation of role models for children is an important function of educators. The commission reported that they were “disturbed that although the diversity of children will continue, the prospects that teachers will be largely white, middle class, female and monolingual will continue” (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002) . A statement by the National Education Association supports the belief that all teachers need to be taught diversity. With that said, the NEA also believes that “having someone that looks like them and that can relate to them culturally instills in each child that education is important to everyone....regardless of your background, you can be respected and accomplish many things” (Thompson, 2007).

Does the Shortage Impact Overrepresentation?

Students of color all too often end up in special education programs because teachers do not know how to relate to minority students. Research conducted by the NEA finds that African Americans who are thought to have challenging behaviors are referred more often than white students for programs for students with emotional disabilities. It was also found that Native American students qualify for special education services at a rate twice that of the general student population. English-language learners tend to receive special education services in schools where there are relatively small ELL populations (National Education Association, 2008).

Not only do teachers of color give minority students an opportunity to be understood, they help open lines of communication between white and minority teachers. One teacher reports that a fellow white teacher told her that there “was no one she could turn to for help in relating to her minority students” (Thompson, 2007). Studies show that about one in five students have a parent who was born outside the United States. Therefore, a minority teacher may be asked to sit in on conferences with either the student or parent, or even speak to the child about a specific issue (Thompson, 2007).

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) recognizes the connection between the issues. A position paper states “A continuing shortage of special education teachers, coupled with a shortage of regular education teachers who are adequately trained to work with students with disabilities, hinders the educational achievement of students with

disabilities under the current IDEA system” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2007). To address the issues CEC calls for professional development of prospective and current special and regular educators to include the needs of students with disabilities. A major focus of CEC’s teacher recruitment program is to attract teachers from diverse backgrounds. Not only can special educators provide culturally comfortable relationships, they are able to provide the special instruction students need. In addition, special educators of color can help others understand the “cultural dimensions of student behavior” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2010).

Recommendations

Current Strategies and Proposals for Addressing Problems

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt) provides technical assistance to help alleviate discrepancies in achievement in education due to cultural bias. They propose the development of culturally responsive educational systems that are based on the theory that all students can excel academically when their culture, language, heritage and experiences are valued and they have access to high quality teachers, programs and resources. A culturally responsive system benefits all children by providing them with a variety of experiences. Children are given a sense of belonging while their lives are enriched and their uniqueness is validated (Klingner, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2005).

The Alliance Project at Vanderbilt’s Peabody College of Education is designed to address the problem of the shortage of special education teachers. The Alliance has secured more than 6 million dollars to enable them to work with historically black

institutions and schools as well as tribal schools to mentor faculty members, address issues related to accreditation, and curriculum for multicultural education, and to develop seminars related to teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities (Shaw, 1999).

The Council for Exceptional Children along with the National Clearinghouse on Professions has designed programs to attract and retain special education teachers by producing public service announcements and brochures to attempt to attract potential educators from college age students as well as those who are contemplating career changes. The Council for Exceptional Children is also supporting an effort to align IDEA with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in order to provide “highly qualified” teachers for students with disabilities , to streamline Personnel Preparation programs and to encourage the training of both special and regular education teachers to work with students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2007).

Across the country, individual school districts and states are designing and implementing programs to attract and retain minority teachers. In Kansas, minority teacher candidates and paraprofessionals who want to become special educators receive financial support. Officials there have also found that new teacher attrition could be reduced if teacher candidates had more time in the classroom with master teachers before becoming independent. In Georgia, several school districts sponsor on-site day care for children of special educators and also provide close-circuit cameras to allow teachers to check on their children during the day. Many states forgive student loans for those who teach in critical shortage areas (Chaika, 2006). Another recommendation worth considering is the administration of a survey or interest inventory which might be given

to students interested in entering the field of education in order to possibly attract future special educators.

The overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs has been well documented for more than 40 years. Although some steps have been taken to address the disproportionality, the dilemma continues to affect children across our nation. The shortage of special educators of color has also been well documented with programs being designed and implemented to alleviate the discrepancy. Perhaps by delving into the correlation between the two issues a better understanding of how to address the problem can be revealed.

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